

*Sen. Bob McCaslin Capitol Tidbits*  
*February 28, 2006*

There are officially nine days left in the 2006 legislative session. Today we begin floor debate in the Senate and we have until 5 p.m. on Friday, March 3<sup>rd</sup> to pass out all House bills that were before us. The biggest issue we have to consider is the supplemental budget. Here's a look at the budget and a few other issues we acted on this last week.

**Dueling operating budgets both over-spend, set citizens up for major tax increase or severe cuts in vital services**

Both the House and Senate Democrat budgets increase 2005-07 biennial spending by 17.3 percent over 2004; raise the voter-approved spending limit by more than \$1.2 billion; and leave the state with a projected deficit in the 2007-09 biennium. House and Senate Republicans are strongly warning budget-writers that the "bow-wave" costs created in the new spending will double in 2007-09, making the spending unsustainable and creating false hopes for Washington's vulnerable citizens and public schools. The final version of the 2006 supplemental operating budget will likely be adopted in the last hours of the session.

**Senate approves bill to increase home-heating billing discounts for low-income citizens**

The skyrocketing costs of natural gas and electricity have made it especially hard for low-income senior citizens and families to heat their homes. Early in the session, Senate Bill 2370 was signed into law adding \$7.6 million to the state's Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). This week, the Senate approved a measure appropriating \$6 million to increase tax credits for utilities which offer billing discounts and contribute to LIHEAP. **Senate Bill 6379** is now in the House of Representatives for consideration.

**Doctors and lawyers iron out "good first step" compromise on medical malpractice reform**

As is always true of compromises, no one gets everything, but everybody gets something. Called "mini-mal" and a good first step, the proposed changes to **2<sup>nd</sup> Substitute House Bill 2292** include a pre-lawsuit arbitration system to help resolve cases faster and at less cost; more oversight of malpractice insurance premiums; and steps to increase patient safety. However, major issues still need to be addressed: 1) Revising joint and several liability, so that defendants are accountable for only their own proportionate share of fault; 2) maximizing a patient's recovery of damages by limiting attorney's fees; and 3) allowing future economic and non-economic payments to be made over time. **2SHB 2292**, as amended with the compromise, was approved by the Senate and now goes back to the House of Representatives for approval.

**"School Mapping" for emergency responders gets additional funding in Senate-passed capital budget (Senate Bill 6384)**

When an incident happens at a school, it is critical that police and other emergency personnel have a "map" of the buildings and grounds showing exits and entrances, how a location is situated and how it may be isolated or accessed. In 2003, the Republican budget provided state dollars to augment a federal grant to map every high school in the state. The Senate-passed 2006 supplemental capital budget provides an additional \$1

million to ensure new school designs and remodels incorporate mapping and remapping, and to develop an efficient, cost-effective way to maintain up-to-date maps.

**Senate approves bill to allow the trapping of moles and gophers that rip up private property, ball fields and parks**

Under current law, people who trap moles and gophers face a \$5,000 fine and up to a year in jail. **Senate Bill 5319** makes it legal for people to trap nuisance animals like moles and gophers. Other uses of body-gripping traps are by permit only and may be issued by the Department of Fish and Wildlife to prevent damage or injury to property or resources or to protect human health and safety. Recreational trapping remains illegal. Pelts, other than from nuisance animals, may not be sold unless an animal was trapped under a permit. The Fish and Wildlife Commission is directed to adopt rules regarding types of traps, time intervals for checking traps and the use of bait. The rules may not allow the use of traps with teeth or serrated edges or any spring pole device. SB 5319 is now in the House of Representatives for consideration.

**Ending Session Early!!!**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this column, the biggest issue before us will be the supplemental budget. Since the proposed budgets by the House, Senate and the Governor are all very similar, we have an opportunity to end session a day or two early. We should be able to resolved the budget quickly and go home. Let's save the taxpayers a few dollars, and do just that!

As always, feel free to contact me with your thoughts on these or any other issue.

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